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## The Students' Personal and Professional Development as Psychological Counsellors

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### Abstract

*Purpose of the article* is to explore the essential qualities a counsellor must possess, and to develop these skills in the students attending the undergraduate study programs *Psychology* and *Social Work*. *Research methods*: *Super's work values inventory scale*, *Questionnaire about the necessity of learning skills of students as counsellors*, *A focus group with students from both specializations*. *Conclusions*: Among several aspects involved, the concept of 'diversity' implies individual recognition of group differences, treating people as individuals and valuing heterogeneity in school, community, and at the work place. In this way, the premises for understanding and respecting each human being and each group may be ensured.

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### 1. Premises for long-lasting development in contemporary society

**Long-lasting development** represents that form of development that pursues the needs of the present, without compromising the next generations' possibility to satisfy their own needs. The concept of long-lasting development is based on ensuring a balance between socio-economic development and the way in which natural resources are exploited. The concept of long-lasting development may derive from:

- 1) an economic point of view: efficiency, growth, stability
- 2) a social point of view: standard of living, social equity, social dialogue and delegation of responsibilities protecting the culture and patrimony.
- 3) an ecological point of view: the conservation and protecting the natural resources, biodiversity.

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4) an educational point of view: allowing equal access of the entire social categories, regardless of their background, parents' educational level, religious belief or intellectual level.

Diversity is a natural way of life. It is an inherent and natural characteristic of nature, culture and society, which means differences and their positive valuing. We encounter differences everywhere, as the world includes people of different gender, age, abilities, beliefs, ethnic origins, race, religious denomination, social membership, different sexual orientations.

Diversity implies recognition of individual and group differences, treating people as individuals and valuing diversity in school, community, at the work place, ensuring the premises for understanding and respecting each human being and each group.

In school, there are students who have extremely various special situations:

- both teachers and students have a different social and cultural background, may have different religions or may pertain to different denominations
- each teacher and each student has a unique personality, which means that every human being thinks and feels differently, and this aspect confers uniqueness and individuality
- students have different learning styles, as well as different capacities of assimilating information
- in accomplishing the school and extra school activities, it is essential to take into consideration the differences between students, so that these may be accepted and valued.

## **2. The management of educational institutions: school as a social organization**

The school as an organization assumes a special contribution to the long-lasting development of a culture and country through its projected goals and objectives, which are the foundation of some *specific activities* (education, instruction, professional training, etc.), unfolding in a *formal* and *non-formal* environment, which cultivate the cultural values of the entire society, reflected at the pedagogical level.

## **3. Exploring counselling skills**

Counselling, often described as talking therapy, is a process aimed at providing clients with the time and space to explore their problems, understand their problems and resolve or come to term with their problems in a confidential setting. The *Royal College of Psychiatrists* (2006) defines counselling simply as a type of psychotherapy, which helps people address and resolve their problems and work through their feelings. They describe a counsellor as someone who uses counselling to solve people's problems or plan for the future and who may work with individual patients, in pairs or groups.

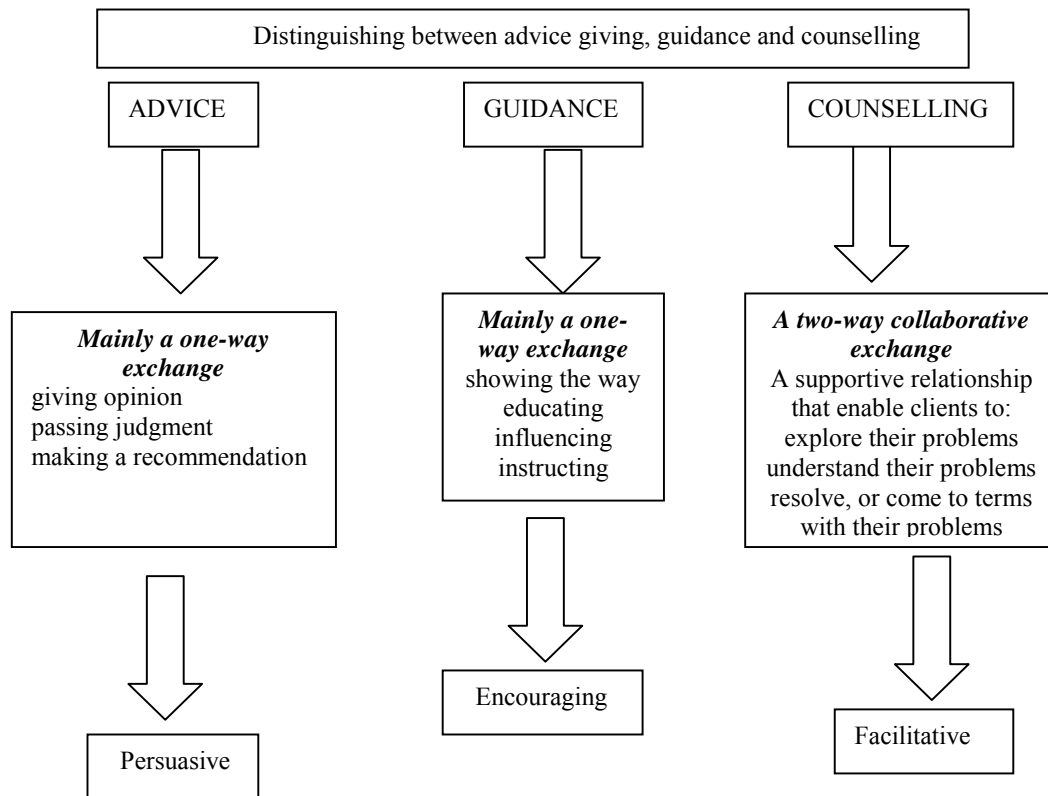


Fig.1 Distinction between advice, giving, guidance and counselling

In order to lay the foundations for building a trust-based relationship, counsellors:

- provide a safe and supportive setting, free from intrusions and distractions,
- respect client confidentiality,
- respect the client's principles, ethnicity and coping resources,
- refrain from being judgmental,
- avoid stereotyping or labelling,
- shelve personal prejudices,
- maintain impartiality, integrity and reliability.

Counselling help clients to:

- adapt to situations that cannot be changed (e.g. terminal illness, death of a loved one),
- consider aspects of their lives they want to change,
- view their situation from a different perspective,
- create positive changes,
- develop coping strategies,
- develop their full potential, find their own solutions to their problems,
- gain insight into their thoughts, feelings and behaviour,
- grown and develop,
- let go of painful secrets,
- make informed decisions,

- manage life transitions and crises,
- resolve personal and interpersonal conflicts,
- set and achieve goals,
- take control over their lives (Sutton & Stewart, 2013).

By communicating acceptance, we avoid pressurising the client to become someone else. We do not take control and we avoid judging, criticising or condemning. Clients will test if the counsellor accepts them as they are, without approval or disapproval, without making the client feel a lesser person. The students understand that when counsellors accept clients just as they are, clients accept counsellors just as they are, with their strengths and weaknesses, with their successes and failures. The degree to which we accept other people is dependent on the degree of our own self-awareness. Only if we are well-grounded psychologically can we work with other people to mobilize their feelings and energies toward change, growth and fulfilment. When we feel accepted as we truly are, including our strengths and weaknesses, differences of opinions, no matter how unpleasant or uncongenial, we feel liberated from many of the things that enslave us. Acceptance is directed to the needs of the client, rather than to the counsellor's own needs. Acceptance recognizes the potential of the client for self-help and encourages the promotion of the client's growth. Acceptance contains elements of the counsellor's thoughts (knowledge, psychological grounding), feelings (use of self) and behaviour (which must be congruent with what we say).

To become effective counsellors, we need to strive constantly to increase our self-awareness –to discover what makes us tick- to monitor what goes on within us: our thoughts, feelings, sensing, intuition, attitudes, beliefs and how these manifest themselves in our behaviour. In his enlightening book dedicated to raising self-awareness entitled *Know Yourself!*, Burnard defines self-awareness as the continuous and evolving process of getting to know who you are (1997, p.25). ***Self-awareness is being aware of our physical, mental, emotional, moral, spiritual and social qualities, which all make us unique individuals, they all work together to help us reach our full potential.*** Self-awareness hinges on our ability and willingness to explore our own inner world. It is doubtful if any of us truly knows who we are. Life is a constant discovery about parts of us that have, until that moment, remained hidden from our conscious knowledge. There is always more to learn. Every new relationship gives us the opportunity to discover more about ourselves.

#### **4. Counselling skills of the students attending the undergraduate study programs Psychology and Social Work - experimental study**

##### **a. Purpose of study:**

1. *Identifying and structuring the students' social values*
2. *Identifying students' perceptions of the role of mediation and counselling skills in the educational act*

##### **b. Research methods:**

The research was based on three surveys:

1. *Super's work values inventory scale*
2. *Questionnaire about the necessity of learning skills of students as counsellors*
3. *A focus group with students from both specializations*

##### **c. Findings**

To validate the two hypotheses, we used independent samples t test for the two groups and correlations between two groups of 50 people, aged between 22 and 32 years, students in Psychology and students in Social Work.

##### Hypothesis no.1

There is an initial presupposition that there are significant differences in the professional values of students in Psychology and students in Social Work.

##### *Interpretation of results*

After applying Super's work values inventory scale and by using the t-test, we drew a comparison between the opinion of students in Psychology and the opinion of students in Social Work.

The responses concerning the scale of professional values revealed that there are significant differences

between students in Psychology and students in Social Work in terms of the following aspects:

- moral values: for which  $t = 2.280$  corresponds to  $p = 0.028$
- material values: for which  $t = 2.443$  corresponds to  $p = 0.019$
- intellectual values for which  $t = 2.434$  corresponds to  $p = 0.020$ .

As far as social values and leadership is concerned, there are no significant differences since the level of relevance exceeds the accepted value 0.05.

#### Hypothesis no. 2

There is an initial presupposition that there are significant differences in ranking the personality traits depending on the importance they have in shaping the professional values of students in Psychology and students in Social Work.

#### *Interpretation of results*

After applying a personal test (a questionnaire) to the two groups, significant differences resulted concerning assertiveness and empathy, which were better represented with students in Psychology than in students in Social Work. For 'assertiveness' we obtained  $t = 1930$  for a significance threshold of  $p = 0.06$ ; for 'empathy', we obtained  $t = 4,048$  for a significance threshold of  $p = 0.000$ . In terms of ranking of personality traits depending on their importance, the following results were obtained for students in Psychology: the first rank was taken by communication skills, followed by empathy; a third position was shared by two traits: tolerance and openness to the others' needs. In terms of ranking of personality traits depending on their importance, the following results were obtained for students in Social Work: first came communication skills followed by tolerance, openness and positive thinking.

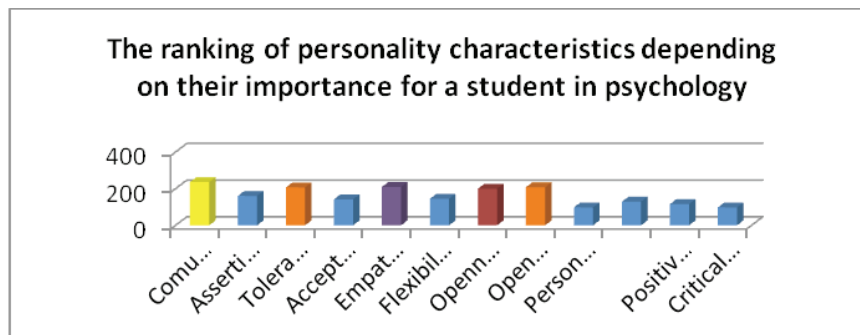


Fig. 2 The ranking of personality characteristics depending on their importance for students in Psychology

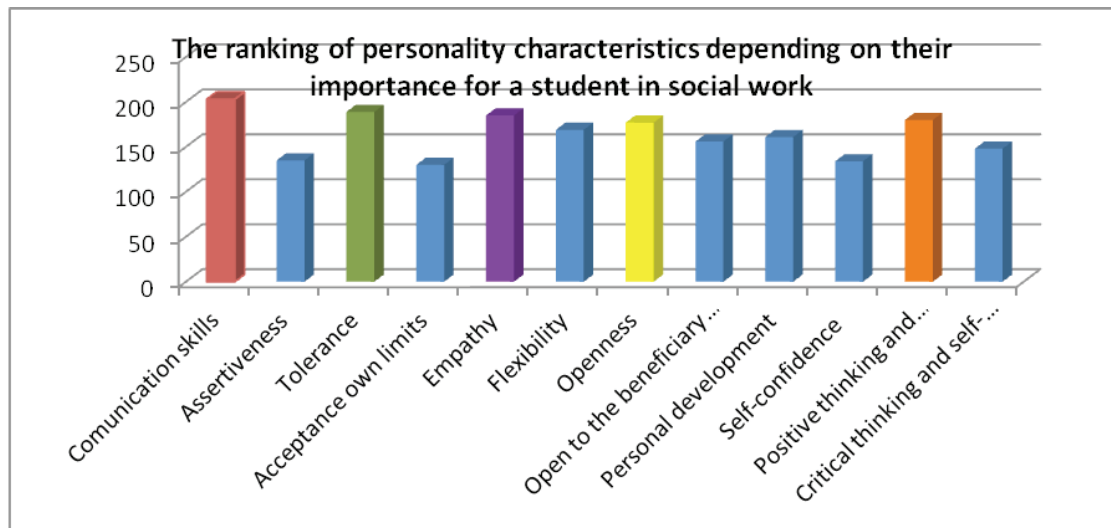


Fig.3. The ranking of personality characteristics depending on their importance for students in Social Work

Regarding the ranking of categories of beneficiaries according to the degree of difficulty of counselling, most students in Psychology and Social Work found as the most difficult the counselling of students with emotional, behavioural and social problems (anxiety, depression, suicide attempt, etc.). In the opinion of students in psychology, the second most difficult to counsel came students with traumatic family backgrounds (parents divorced, living abroad, children in foster care, etc.). The students in Social Work regarded as the second most difficult to counsel students with special educational needs, which came third for the students in Psychology.

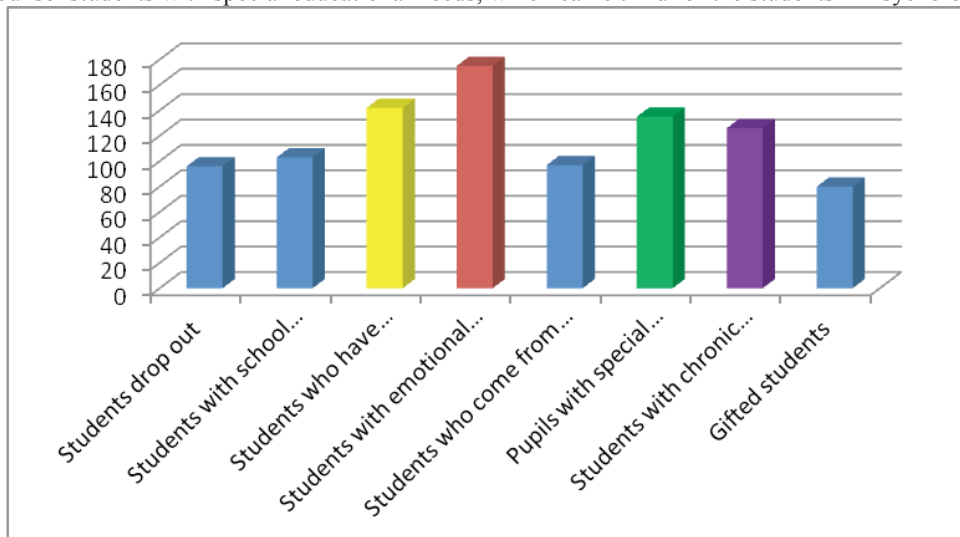


Fig.4. The ranking of difficulty of counselling with various categories of beneficiaries by students in Psychology

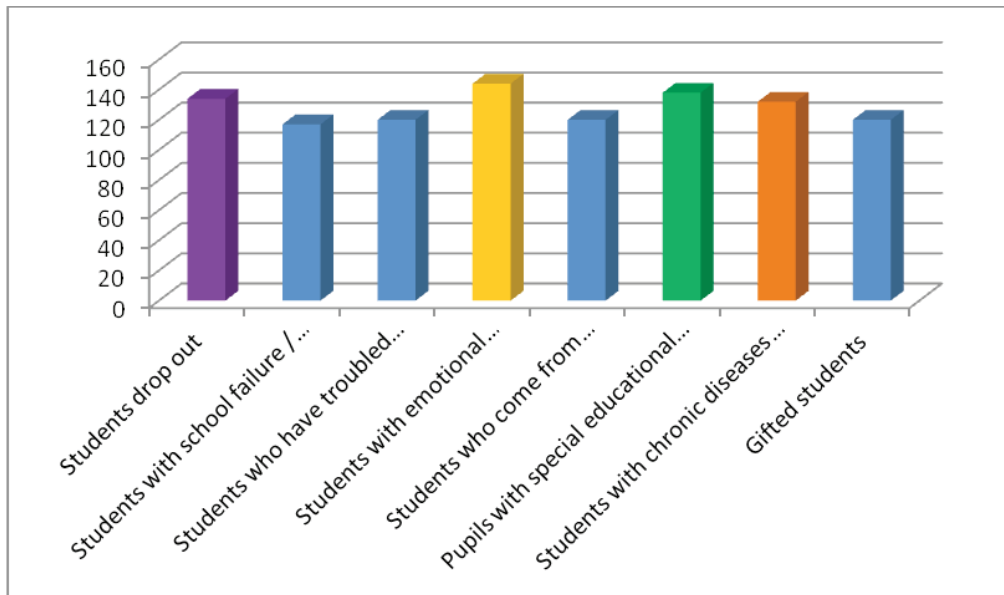


Fig. 5 The ranking of difficulty of counselling with various categories of beneficiaries by students in Social Work

Regarding the interest in developing professional skills, the two groups (students in Psychology and students in Social Work), revealed again four significant differences:

- 1) *Skills in developing educational projects in the area of school counselling* obtained  $t = 2.762$  to  $p = 0.008$ ;
- 2) *Skills in negotiation/mediation, conflict resolution* obtained  $t = 3.128$  to  $p = 0.003$ ;
- 3) *Skills in developing and use of tools/procedures specific to psycho-pedagogical counselling* obtained  $t = 0.023$  to  $p = 2.352$
- 4) *Skills in affective - sympathetic relationship* obtained  $t = 3.434$  to  $p = 0.00$ .

As far as *Computer skills* were concerned, there were significant differences  $t=2.307$  to  $p=0,025$ , which revealed that social workers have better *computer skills* than psychologists. *Research skills, conflict solving and innovation* become better manifested in psychologists than in social workers.

Group Statistics					
	group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Communication skills in the native language	1	25	4.12	.971	.194
	2	25	3.44	.821	.164
Significant knowledge in the area of undergraduate studies	1	25	3.88	.726	.145
	2	25	3.20	.764	.153
Research skills	1	25	3.64	.757	.151
	2	25	3.20	.408	.082
Skills in relating with the clients	1	25	3.96	.735	.147
	2	25	3.32	.627	.125
Skills in conflict solving	1	25	3.92	.997	.199
	2	25	3.40	.764	.153
Organizational skills	1	25	3.80	.816	.163
	2	25	3.24	.663	.133
Creativity, innovation	1	25	3.96	.889	.178
	2	25	3.08	.954	.191

Fig. 6. Differences between the students in psychology (group 1) and students in Social Work (group2)

- d. Sound differences between the two groups were found in *Communication skills*, *Research skills*, *Skills in relating with the clients*, *Skills in conflict solving* in favour of the students in Psychology, who consider these skills as a priority for their personal and professional development.

## 5. Conclusions

The study shows the different perception on the role of counselling and mediation in the educational act. Teachers and students alike have a different social and cultural background, may have different religions or may pertain to different denomination. Each teacher and student has a unique personality, which means that every human being thinks and feels differently, which confers uniqueness and individuality. Students have different learning styles, as well as different capacities of information and assimilation of the psychological counselling skills. In carrying out the school and extra-school activities, it is essential to take into consideration the differences between students, so that these may be accepted and valued. Students have to know that it is very important to understand the essential qualities a counsellor needs. Fundamentally, the counsellor's qualities mentioned are relationship qualities that are embraced in most therapies and deemed crucial in person-centred counselling. Briefly, they include the counsellor's ability:

- to demonstrate genuineness: being oneself (open, transparent) in the relationship, not hiding behind a mask of professionalism (also known as congruence, realness or authenticity)
- to show unconditional positive thinking: acceptance of the client without judgment or conditions attached (also referred to as caring, valuing, prizing, respect)
- to convey a deep level of empathic understanding.

Students understand that acceptance is directed to the need of the client, rather than to the counsellor's own needs. Diversity implies individual recognition and recognition of group differences, treating humans as individuals and capitalizing diversity in school, community, working place. The educational programs for the youth have caught the teacher's attention, and *the development of mediation in the local communities have triggered understanding the alternative ways of conflict solving*. Thus we have to notice the self-directing of states in this respect. *Starting with the year 1980, the use of mediation in education has extended to various parts of the world: Canada, Australia and New Zealand; the educational practices that implied mediation started to spread more in Europe, as well. In 1989, Walker's work on violence and conflict solving in schools, authorized by the European Union, included information regarding mediation in education, leading to the organization of the European Network of Conflict Solving in Education. A special interest for conflict solving and mediation in education was manifested in Northern Ireland as well.*

*The role of the school mediator* is to support school attendance by all the children in the community, to encourage parents' involvement in children education and in school's life and to facilitate the cooperation between



family, school and community. **The school mediator** acts as an agent of the community in relation with school, represents the community in school and the school in the community, according to the job description in the official occupational standard. The school mediator's main job is to support the school attendance by all the children in the community, to encourage parents to get involved in children education and school life, and to facilitate the cooperation between families, school and community.

The school mediator and the psychologists cooperate with the schools staff, with the parents' council and with other parent-associated structures recognized by the school, with the local and regional authorities, with non-governmental organizations and other school partners, that have as a target a growing school attendance rate, and the improvement of the educational services offered by school to the community. Here are the expectations teachers have from psychologists, school mediators and social workers:

- to facilitate the school-family-community dialogue;
- to contribute to maintaining and developing school trust and respect for the community;
- to monitor pre-school children in the community that do not attend kindergarten and to support the family/or the child's legal tutors in taking the necessary steps for their enrolment in kindergarten;
- to monitor the school-aged children from the school precinct that have never been enrolled in school, by proposing to the school management optimal solutions for their recovery and to facilitate their access to the alternative teaching programs (enrolment in mass full time courses or in part-time courses, inclusion in the "A second chance" program, etc.);
- to support organization of supporting programs for the improvement of school results (recovery programs, programs of personalized intervention, "after school" programs, etc.);
- to collect statistical data relevant to the monitoring of the access to education and maintaining children in the obligatory educational system;
- to consign accurately and objectively the educational problems or of different nature which affect the participation to education of community's children, informing the families about the school's role and the legal provisions regarding children school attendance;
- to ensure the update of information regarding the children who are most likely to abandon school, by monitoring their school situation and the extra scholar activity, encouraging their participation in education;
- to hand on to school the data collected in the community with the purpose of identifying the optimal solution for ensuring the children's equal access to education.

The roles of the mediator must be extended to all educational establishments, whether they may have an institutional character or promote informal and non-formal education. The educational mediator will shape his behaviour according to the characteristics of the social group he belongs to, will promote the child's superior interest and will contribute together with the other specialists to ensure the person's individual homeostasis and institutional development, as well.

After discussions with students in a focus group, they showed the role of psychological counselling in educational act.

They concluded that the following skills play an important role in teacher training:

- deep knowledge of the subject they teach
- pedagogical knowledge
- skills in guiding and counselling of students
- understanding the social and cultural dimension of education.

The teaching profession should be based on partnerships. The institutions providing vocational training must organize their work in collaboration and partnership with other schools, local businesses (employers), with providers of training services and other stakeholders. In this respect, teachers play the role of educational mediators between employers and future graduates, facilitating their professional integration.

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